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ABSTRACT

Students today face many more choices than ever before. Increased levels of family stress leave children with more opportunity to exercise independence, while also providing them with greater frustration. This paper profiles a program that aims to help children (elementary through high school; alternative, public, and private schools; children with special needs; and parents) develop critical thinking skills by teaching them to calm down and re-organize themselves when they are under stress, to increase their understanding of social situations, to elaborate personally meaningful and prosocial goals, to consider alternative responses to situations and their consequences, to plan detailed strategies for reaching their goals, and to understand and accept social decisions for which there are no alternatives. Included are intervention strategies for high-risk youth and those receiving special education services, and a variety of preventive interventions in the areas of health promotion, conflict resolution, violence, and substance abuse prevention. A summary is provided of the program curriculum, as is a description of program objectives; an outline of the program's purpose; information on the services provided and the implementation period; characteristics of the site where the program was initiated; details on the target population; services provided; type of staff available and percentage of time devoted to the program; program costs and funding sources; problems encountered and solutions to these problems; a synopsis of program accomplishments/reported outcomes; and evaluation data. Contains a list of 12 publications describing/evaluating the program. (RJM)

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The Social Decision Making and Life Skills Development Program: A Framework for Promoting Students' Social Competence and Life Skills and Preventing Violence, Substance Abuse and Related Problem Behaviors

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Program Title, Location, Contact Information

Title: **The Social Decision Making and Life Skills Development Program: A Framework for Promoting Students' Social Competence and Life Skills and Preventing Violence, Substance Abuse and Related Problem Behaviors**

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Summary of curriculum and description of program objectives.

Social Decision Making represents a family of curricular approaches with a common set of objectives:

* to calm down and re-organize themselves when they are under stress such as negative peer pressure
* to develop their understanding of social situations and the feelings and perspectives of people in them
* to elaborate and clarify personally meaningful and prosocial goals
* to consider possible alternative actions and their consequences
* to plan detailed strategies for reaching their goals
* to understand and accept social decisions for which there are no alternatives, such as those related to rejection of drug use, illegal alcohol use, smoking, and the use of violence to resolve interpersonal disputes and conflicts.

Specifically, the focus of our work, which has been approved by the National Diffusion Network of the U.S. Dept. of Education, is Social Decision Making and Problem Solving Skills. We have embedded within this critical thinking skills framework a variety of applications, including interventions for high risk youth and those receiving special education services (including work with parents), and a variety of preventive interventions in the area of health promotion, conflict resolution, violence and substance abuse prevention. **Our work is directly related to two of the National Education Goals: Goal 3 (preparing students for responsible citizenship and achievement) and Goal 7**

(relating to safe, disciplined and alcohol and drug-free schools). One of the cornerstones of our work at all grade levels is the use of media, and we have devoted particular time to critical thinking applications in the area of television/video, current events and the print media, and community service.

There are three curriculum components, or phases, and those carrying out Social Decision Making can emphasize activities from one or more phases:

*Readiness: Targets self-control skills (e.g.,listening, following directions, resisting provocations, avoiding provoking others) and self calming and group participation and social awareness skills (e.g.,how to select friends, show caring).

*Instructional: While there are many skills necessary for social decision making, our research and development team has synthesized what tradition in education, psychology, and philosophy agree can be identified 8 primary skill areas, or "steps": 1. Notice signs of feelings in oneself and others; 2.Identify issues or problems; 3. Determine and select goals; 4. Generate alternative solutions; 5. Envision possible consequences; 6. Select your best solution; 7. Plan your actions and make a final check for obstacles; 8. Notice what happened and use the information for future decision making and problem solving. Students learn and practice these steps in diverse developmentally appropriate and salient contexts so that when they are under pressure and/or not under adult supervision, they will turn to their Readiness skills and use the social decision making strategy.

*Application: Students apply their skills in everyday and academic situations, including community service, riding the school bus, critical viewing of the media, handling stereotypes and prejudice and developing cultural competency, classroom and school decorum. For example, in the area of current events, students at the elementary level are shown how to look at each issue as a problem to be solved, based on decisions to be made by the various people involved. They learn to identify the different points of view in common problems, such as events in the Middle East, and learn how to think of alternative solutions, consider consequences, and plan desirable course of action. At the middle school level, students apply the same basic approach at a more sophisticated level. They are taught to understand how newspaper articles are created and how to create their own "current events"

articles on issues that are of importance to them, their school, and their community. Teachers have found that asking students to write stories about alcohol, drugs, health, conflict, and violence has led them to begin to be able to take new perspectives on these issues. Moreover, much is gained when adults are in the role of catalyzing and guiding children's problem solving, rather than serving as "expert" or information provider, in these sensitive but critical life skills areas.

Program Purpose

Children today face many more choices than ever before. Their families' stress and economic obligations leave children with more opportunity to exercise independence, while also providing them with greater frustration. Clearly, these conditions tax children's capacity for sound social judgment. Ultimately, success in the adult world is as dependent on life skills and social and interpersonal intelligence as it is on academic ability.

For students to enter the community of responsible adults prepared for a diversity of social roles, they must possess critical thinking and problem solving skills. Citizenship, parenthood, family life, and success in the workplace require numerous decisions. **No one is better positioned than pupil services providers and other educators, in partnership with parents, to make sure that children's skills in these areas are built.** Among the most promising knowledge and practice bases from which to derive the needed instructional technologies is that of community/preventive psychology and social problem solving.

Social decision making and problem solving defines self-control, group participation and social awareness, and social-cognitive decision making skills as key components of interventions. Recent work has emphasized that an interaction of affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects characterizes the underlying dimensions of skills and instructional process for skill building. The social decision making approach is based on proven methods and theory. As practiced in hundreds of schools in its New Jersey base and across the United States, **social decision making and problem solving provides a technology with which educators and parents can create learning communities that nurture both the human spirit and the intellect. This is the ultimate purpose of the program.**

Services Provided

As it became clearer that prevention of social casualties was becoming more and more important because of epidemics of substance abuse, AIDS, and violence, the focus of the project expanded to address these and related issues. Rutgers University provides centralized training, consultation services, and research and development through the Center for Applied Psychology. Psychological Enterprises Incorporated, in association with the Center, pioneers applications with computer and multimedia technologies (201-829-6806). Another partner, the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey-Community Mental Health Center at Piscataway, has established an innovative unit, the Social Problem Solving Unit, with a mission to aid school districts throughout the United States and internationally in developing social competence promotion programs (908-235-4939).

Implementation Period

The program is implemented flexibly throughout the course of the entire school year. There are examples of infusion into academic areas such as social studies and language arts, there are social problem solving class periods and curricula for self-contained special education classrooms, it has been integrated into health education, guidance, school discipline systems, and community service projects, in before or after school group programs, with parents, and in a variety of ways appropriate to the specific needs of the school settings. It incorporates and is consistent with cooperative learning approaches, peer tutoring and peer problem solving, and conflict mediation.

Characteristics of Program Site

The program has been carried out in elementary, middle/junior high, and high schools, in alternative schools, and in public and private schools, including those for children with special education needs, in urban, suburban, and rural areas. It also has been directed at parent groups.

Target Population and Number of Students Served

As noted above, the program is being used in a wide variety of school contexts and does not have a specific target population per se. As of this writing, the program is being implemented in approximately 30 school districts in New Jersey, 20

additional states, and school districts in Australia, India, and Israel. Community groups become involved through the community service application phase activities. Youth organizations such as Boys and Girls Clubs, 4-H, and Girl and Boy Scouts can be involved through a special video-based program called "Talking with TJ." Parents are involved through a parent version of the curriculum and in the book, Teach Your Child Decision Making, available in English and in editions in Portuguese (published in Brazil) and Chinese (published in Taiwan) (see Publications listing).

Services Provided

Approval by the U.S. Dept. of Education's National Diffusion Network has allowed us to worked out a number of training approaches. There are single, two, and three day trainings, with multiple day trainings often separated by several weeks to allow for practice. **Training can emphasize pupil services personnel's roles as direct implementers or as program development consultants.** Extended follow-up consultation after training is a key program element. In some districts, training or consultation is provided to a district-designated social decision making coordinator who oversees local training, program development, evaluation, and expansion. There is a program to allow individuals to become certified trainers of the program. Most importantly, the curriculum materials serve as complete guides for implementation, including all that would be necessary for conducting in-service or pre-service trainings and ongoing program supervision and monitoring.

Type of Staff Available and Percentage FTE Devoted to Program

The social decision making approach is not an add-on. It is meant to be incorporated into the ongoing activities and responsibilities of pupil services personnel, teachers, and all others who work in the schools. As noted earlier, pupil services personnel can be involved as direct implementers at the individual, group, or classroom levels, co-facilitators of groups or classroom instruction, consultants to the latter, or consultants to incorporating social decision making into school discipline, health education, parent involvement, multicultural competence, and all school-based or school-linked prevention programs.

Cost of the Program and Funding Sources

Costs include curriculum materials, for which bulk rates can be obtained, and

training, which can be estimated at $500 per full day, plus travel expenses and costs incurred. (Note that training is tailored wherever possible, so prior consultation is necessary.) If there is expertise in a school or district in the area of the social and life skills program implementation, observation of a program in action or consultation once one's efforts have begun might replace formal outside training; the curriculum materials contain sufficient information to serve as staff development manuals. Funding for the program has been obtained through district school budget allocations, parent groups, relevant county, state, and local private foundation grants and corporate and business sponsorships, and Federal drug-free and safe schools and alcohol prevention monies.

Problems Encountered and Solutions

We have been able to solve key problems such as "not enough time" and scarce school resources by designing a framework that can link with and integrate, rather than add on to, existing social, affective, and academic goals, consonant with Goals 2000 and its state-level and local variants. Discussions of solutions can be found in our curriculum materials. The need for parental involvement has been addressed by showing that the program's benefits are not dependent on such involvement, though certainly enhanced by it, and by developing materials to allow parental involvement at many levels of intensity (Clabby & Elias, 1986; Elias, 1993).

Looking to the future, the principle areas in which current work must be extended relates to sensitivity to multicultural factors and the unique needs of urban settings and special needs youth. We have begun to extend social decision making and life skills approaches into urban areas characterized by cultural and ethnically diverse populations and greater proportions of children with special needs and significant emotional and behavioral difficulties. Our strategy in these efforts has been to systematically modify our curriculum materials and approaches to be better tailored to the children, educators, and parents with whom the work is being carried out. For example, special education children have been responsive to instructional techniques incorporating music. Thus, they learned self-control in part by becoming involved in creating and performing the "Keep Calm Rap." Students with combinations of emotional and learning difficulties are particularly responsive

to the multi-modal stimulation provided by video media, and so they are being taught social decision making in part through watching, critiquing, and improving educational and other videos, using an instructional technology we refer to as TVDRP (Elias & Tobias, in press). From a developmental perspective, video-based group and classroom interventions are especially powerful at the elementary and high school levels. In the middle school, especially engaging curriculum-based problem solving/decision making heuristics are needed, such as FIG TESPN, a sort of Jiminy Cricket of problem solving.

Another aspect of our work with inner city and special needs populations is the realization that by the time some of them begin to receive social decision making in the middle school, their self-esteem is seriously impaired. Then, it is essential to focus on identifying children's strengths--regardless in what area--and to use this to build a positive sense of confidence. For many students, social decision making opens up arenas in which they do feel confident, and does so in instructional formats in which they feel protected. However, a curriculum-based program often must be supplemented by more intensive services provided to the child in small group or individual meetings by school psychologists, guidance counselors, social workers, learning specialists, occupational therapists, creative arts therapists, or trained regular or special educators. Involving parents to the extent possible also is advisable, as is bringing outside professionals into the school as needed.

Other areas in which exciting inroads are being made are the discipline, health education and health decision making, and conflict resolution systems in schools, particularly with resistant or difficult students. A new tool exists to help pupil services personnel in these and related areas: a problem solving driven, personal computer-based, user-friendly procedure called the **Student Conflict Manager/Personal Problem Solving Guide**. Indeed, the use of computer technologies to foster problem solving and decision making skills in disciplinary situations has been especially promising in lending greater constructiveness and civility to this process than has typically been the case. The program works by taking the 8 step instructional strategy and presenting it to students. It takes students through a process of deciding, depending on the subroutine used, how to avoid getting into trouble of the

kind that they just got into or of deciding on an action plan that will be used to tackle a health, peer, or academic problem that has been bothering them. The adult's role is to serve as a guide or aid, to help students follow up on the action plans they generate, and to be available to deal with any questions students might have. The benefits of a program that allows individualized attention and uses a process compatible with classroom curriculum procedures are obvious. In the Bartle School in Highland Park, NJ, social decision making has been infused into the entire health education curriculum and a "lab" set up where students can go at educators' suggestions or on their own initiative to use the computer program to work out individual problems, health decisions, and other choice or conflict situations.

Finally, it must be noted that there is a synergy between a skill building program and the extent to which it is embedded in an organizational and community environment that takes a comprehensive approach to reducing risk factors and enhancing protective factors related to substance abuse, violence, and social competence and life skills. Ultimately, school-wide models for change, such as "Success for All," "Project Achieve," and Comer's Urban School Power/Site-Based Management Model, must be accompanied by specific group interventions to build self-control, group participation, and social awareness skills in high risk youth.

Program Accomplishments/Reported Outcomes

In this section, recognition of the program will be described and in the following section, evaluation data will be summarized. *It is important to note that significant positive feedback has been gathered concerning the approach by those who have had little or nothing to do with its development.* In 1988, the social decision making and problem solving approach received the prestigious Lela Rowland Prevention Award from the National Mental Health Association and was designated by the New Jersey Dept. of Education as a model program in the elementary grades for the prevention of substance abuse. In 1989, national validation was received from the Program Effectiveness Panel of the U.S. Dept. of Education's National Diffusion Network (NDN); it now can be accessed through NDN's network of Public and Private School Facilitators throughout the U.S., and internationally. In 1992, social decision making was selected by the National Mental Health Association

as a model program for its national prevention technical assistance project, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. In 1993, it was selected as a model for violence prevention and conflict resolution by the N.J. Department of Education.

Evaluation Data

Funding has been received from the William T. Grant Foundation, the National Institute of Mental Health, and the Schumann Fund for New Jersey to carry out action research over a ten year period of time, allowing us to generate extensive formative and summative evaluation information. The major documented effects of the program are that, relative to children who were not participants in social decision making programs of the kind described earlier, children involved in the programs:

* were more sensitive to others' feelings
* had a better understanding of the consequences of their behavior
* showed an increased ability to "size up" interpersonal situations and plan appropriate actions
* had higher self-esteem
* were seen by their teachers as displaying more positive prosocial behavior
* were sought out by their peers for help with problems
* better handled the difficult transition to middle school
* displayed lower than expected levels of antisocial, self-destructive, and socially disordered behavior, even when followed up into high school
* improved in their learning-to-learn skills and in academic areas which had been "infused" with social decision making
* used what they learned in self-control, social awareness, and social decision making and problem solving lessons in situations occurring both inside and outside the classroom.

Data also show that children, teachers, and other educators enjoy the program and put its principles to regular and frequent use. Taken together, the evidence gathered to date indicate that the social decision making approach can be carried out by teachers in diverse settings.

Publications Describing/Evaluating Program

Elias, M. J. (Ed.) (1993). Social decision making and life skills development: Guidelines for middle school educators. Gaithersburg, MD: Aspen. (200 Orchard Ridge Drive, 20878; 1-800-638-8437)

Elias, M. J., & Clabby, J. F. (1992). Building social problem solving skills: Guidelines from a school-based program. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. (350 Sansome Street, 94104)

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Elias, M.J., & Tobias, S.E. (in press). Social problem solving interventions for school practitioners: Individual, group, classroom, and organizational approaches. New York: Guilford.

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Talking with TJ: A New Educational Resource to Teach Teamwork, Cooperation, and Conflict Resolution. Hallmark Corporate Foundation: Omaha, NE (1002 N. 42nd St., 68131-9834).

The Student Conflict Manager/Personal Problem Solving Guide Software and Guidebook. Cedar Knolls, New Jersey: Psychological Enterprises, Incorporated (160 Hanover Avenue, Suite 103, Cedar Knolls, NJ 07927).

Clabby, J., & Elias, M. J. (1986). Teach your child decision making. New York: Doubleday. (distributed by second author at Rutgers address)

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